
RECRUITING FROM WITHIN: ACTION-ORIENTED RESEARCH SOLUTIONS TO INTERNAL STUDENT RECRUITMENT IN COLLEGIATE AVIATION EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The authors present a case of good practice in student recruitment that can be applied for the overall benefit of collegiate aviation education. In this paper the authors explore an infrequently visited well of potential aviation student enrollments. They establish that student recruitment must be an active and ongoing commitment of each aviation academic unit. The single case scenario presented provides examples of internal student recruitment strategies that can be applied to any academic program. Related literature is examined and reported to theoretical and applied frameworks. A conceptual model of action research is developed and operationalized within the qualitative research paradigm. The supporting research tools of focus groups and Delphi are implemented in a triangulation discovery process which provides substantive results. The results convey a system that maximizes student recruitment and concludes with a plan that can be generalized to most collegiate aviation programs. In completing the action research circle, a call for a continuous improvement system for internal student recruitment is advocated to ensure a positive future for both collegiate aviation education and the whole of the aviation universe.

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INTRODUCTION

Everywhere in the aviation industry today, college faculty and administrators are being told that the need for pilots, managers and other aviation specialists is increasing. That need should be realized by increased enrollments on our aviation college campuses. Many believe that collegiate aviation education is now recovering from a declining enrollment trend. Forecasts by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and industry document renewed growth and demand for aviation employment. (Federal Aviation Administration [FAA], 1997). However, long-standing practice suggests that marketing (in this case, student recruitment) should not only be practiced in the worst of times, but should be accelerated in the best of times. Consequently, rising forecasts of market potential cannot be rationalized into a sense of we are here and they will come. Therefore, aviation faculties must be pro-active and must maximize efforts to use all available tools to recruit aviation students.

Aviation professors must change their attitudes regarding recruitment or they may lose their jobs. Tenure does not help in this situation. Academic programs or departments can be eliminated, thus eliminating the tenured positions. Professors who have boasted: "Half of you will fail my course," have found themselves called upon to teach for mastery. Soon enough, many of them began to see the connection between student recruitment and retention, and their mortgage payments. (Mhalba, 1996).

Collegiate aviation education provides one of the most challenging, yet rewarding, career fields in academia. Unfortunately, it appears in many circumstances to have been kept a secret by the colleges and universities that offer such programs. Students on some college campuses are totally unaware that their college or university offers degrees in aviation. Often students (or worse yet, graduates) complain they had no idea that an aviation major was offered on their campus. The authors assert that it is time to cultivate those untapped resources on our own campuses to increase our aviation majors.

There is no question that the aviation industry is increasing in size (FAA, 1997) which, by itself, should increase the need for aviation majors. Combine that increase with the fact that many World War II, Korean War, and Vietnam trained military pilots and supporting staff personnel are now reaching retirement age, and it becomes obvious that the aviation industry desperately needs more aviation graduates. It is the task and the duty of the aviation colleges to satisfy that need given that the supply of pilots provided by the military is diminishing. Not only does the aviation industry need replacements, but it needs graduates who have been trained and educated to be leaders and managers, not simply workers and followers.

The next question should be: how do we attract that many students from our own campus. The authors would like to answer that question by explaining in a case study what has been done by one university which offers two undergraduate aviation majors.

New conventional wisdom has college training replacing the old minimum of a high school diploma for workers. (Grove, 1992). That certainly is true in aviation. Today, getting a job with one of the major airlines is virtually impossible for a pilot without a four-year college degree. In recent years, several reports have indicated that more than 96 percent of successful job applicants hired by major airlines have a college degree.

Framing the Case for Internal Recruitment in Collegiate Aviation Education. To anyone associated with recruitment of students on college and university campuses, it is obvious that there exists an entire group of students on campus who are either undecided or who are not satisfied with their current educational path. These students should all be exposed to the exciting world of aviation, and should be made aware of the potential career paths that exist for them if they adopt aviation as a career. The problem is how best to accomplish that goal within our own college campuses. The key, of course, is marketing. Unfortunately, "Marketing the services of colleges and universities is a discipline still in its infancy.... As in any organization that embraces the marketing concept, marketing research has become increasingly important to colleges and universities (Hayes, 1996, p.10)."

There exists a wealth of literature regarding how to externally recruit new students to an educational institution. Unfortunately, virtually no literature exists on how to successfully recruit students for any specific program or major from within the campus. Obviously, the success rate for such recruitment efforts can be much higher and will certainly result in less expense than with off campus recruitment efforts. That is why it is asserted that efforts expended by aviation faculty to recruit new aviation majors from within their own college campuses will produce the most productive and cost-effective results. It will also help the aviation community to experience a significant increase in qualified college aviation graduates.

As with any realistic and achievable goal, a plan must be developed (Lay, Endo, 1987). The plan must be realistic and must be designed for use by the one who will actually implement it. Nothing is more useless than a very attractive, nicely prepared plan that is never used. That is why the authors of this paper have chosen the action research method for their suggested solution to aviation student recruitment. Next, the programs must be prioritized, and the budget and financial commitments made in the order of importance, remembering to include a certain degree of flexibility to anticipate unforeseen future changes. Lastly, the plan must receive widespread institutional support involving key administrators, faculty and student leaders, admission officers, alumni, and academic units. The plan proposed in this paper will: (a) develop goals and objectives, (b) design marketing strategies and programs, and (c) have a budget that allocates financial resources to various marketing programs.

Why STUDY Student Recruitment? The purpose of this paper is to identify the need for additional aviation students; to decide that on each of our campuses there exist many undecided or undeclared students who are searching for the exact career field for them; and to offer suggestions on how to attract that undecided student to become an aviation major. It is also the purpose of this paper to convince aviation educators that marketing is not an onerous and unworthy idea; marketing techniques need to be used to attract new aviation majors. Aviation faculties need to be persuaded that potential aviation students are potential clients, or customers. The reticence with which aviation academics have previously embraced the marketing of new students needs to be eliminated. Academics now even camouflage the concept of marketing by calling it by another name. "Academia has quietly rejected the use of words like marketing and consumer and disguised them in other words like institutional research, enrollment management or issues management. Who could argue with anything as innocuous sounding as 'issues management.'" (Grove, 1992, p. 19). According to Grove, this attitude exists because college faculties tend to associate marketing strategies with flashy ads for fancy cars or slick brochures for expensive perfumes. It is the purpose of this paper to dispel some of these archaic notions and to convince college aviation faculties that marketing will work for them.

Operational Parameters and Environment. In the preparation of this article, the authors have limited the scope of the research and the single scenario case study to an examination of the procedure and the effects of an internally based recruitment effort only, eschewing any in-depth examination of the benefits and procedures involved in an external recruitment effort to part two of the series.

Also, the authors strongly believe that retention is essential to the continued vitality of any aviation program. This paper will be devoted to a discussion of how on-campus college students can be attracted to aviation. It is well known that the aviation career field is notorious for losing its majors. In fact, several aviation programs (including the university involved in the case study presented in this paper) have experienced an attrition rate often exceeding seventy-five percent. Four year aviation colleges expend significant effort to attract students to their programs, yet as many as seventy-five of every one hundred students leave the program and do not graduate with an aviation degree. The topic of retention will be provided in part three of this series.

Recruitment is defined as: "the active process an institution undertakes to favorably influence a prospective student's decision to attend the institution. The recruitment phase begins with identifying prospects, that is, those students who are eligible to attend and may have some affinity for the institution. Recruitment ends and retention begins once the student enrolls." (Dolence, 1993, p.15). This holds true as applied to the concept of internal student recruitment.

"In higher education, the product design involves curriculum and academic program development. When a product appeals to a well-defined yet not neces-

sarily small segment of the total prospect base, that segment is called a niche” (Dolence, 1993, p. 17). In our single scenario case example, our niche is based upon our specific program offerings.

Literature Framing the Case. There are many philosophies on how an academic department should approach the concepts of marketing. In general, they vary through the diversity of the department chairperson. Many departments still believe that it is unprofessional to go out and sell their academic program; this is quite an outdated idea. Also, many institutions of higher education feel an open admissions policy is a strong marketing tool for increasing enrollment. Those who hold this belief fail to see how marketing can be used to promote academic integrity through soliciting top students for their programs (Bassin, 1975).

For an academic department to successfully compete for resources today, it must keep its enrollments up by actively marketing its courses. The minimal marketing strategy used in the past, where departments designed programs and simply waited for students to appear, is no longer effective. If an academic program has sufficient demand without active marketing, it might choose to direct its efforts toward recruiting higher quality students and gaining a more prominent reputation. Departments should take a balanced approach to marketing. Marketing programs should strive to assure a quality product with reasonable promotion efforts to achieve high product adoption and high consumer satisfaction (Curtis, 1984).

Academic departments should consider adopting a three-step process to improve or initiate a recruitment strategy. First, a plan of action must be developed. It should include a timetable, establishment of goals, and target figures. A designated follow-up procedure is crucial to the plan of action. The monitoring of a plan is as vital to the plan’s success as the plan is itself. Guaranteeing the survival of a system requires a continuous process of both selection and checking to see if the selection is going to work. It is a counterbalancing action that checks to see if the plan is still valid (Schreyogg, 1987). Next, contact points with the students must be refined. Publications and other departmental literature must be current and informative. The distribution system for this material must be expedient and reliable. Contacts must be developed in feeder areas. Faculty involvement is a key factor. Finally, an assessment procedure must be implemented. (Goodell, Bowen, Holt 1991).

A literature review regarding aviation academic involvement in student recruitment, discovered a telephone survey of administrators representing the aviation educational programs of 20 colleges and universities. These schools, which are dispersed geographically throughout the United States, have enrollments of 2,000 to 30,000. With 81 degree programs and 7390 majors, the majors average 5 to 600 per degree program. Administrators being surveyed were asked, “What marketing techniques do you use in the recruitment of students for your degree program?” Table 1 summarizes those responses.

Table 1
Recruiting Techniques

<i>Responses</i>	<i>Frequency*</i>
Reputation of Educational Institution	12
Word of Mouth	9
No Current Marketing Program	6
Personal Promotional Lectures	3
Print/Electronic Media - Free PR	3
Print/Electronic Media - Paid	3
Location	2
Not Allowed to Advertise	2

* Note: Several respondents offered multiple responses.

It should be noted that several administrators stated they currently use no marketing techniques; however, they did rely on word of mouth and reputation. This indicates a lack of marketing understanding, as word of mouth and reputation are powerful marketing tools which can enhance, reduce or quite distinctly alter perceptions and opinions. It appears that educators themselves are not educated in the concept of marketing and fail to fully realize how marketing can benefit their institutions. It should be emphasized that marketing is not limited to paid advertisements. Marketing includes a variety of applications as highlighted in this paper. To correct the shortcomings of college administration, marketing principles must be learned and incorporated into an administration's way of thinking. Publication and integration of this knowledge should be ingrained into education just as it has been in industry. Cross-cultural communication should take place between business and education. Likewise, communication among academic functions must take place in order for institutions to maximize the benefits of an encompassing, comprehensive marketing program. (Goodell, Bowen, Holt, 1991).

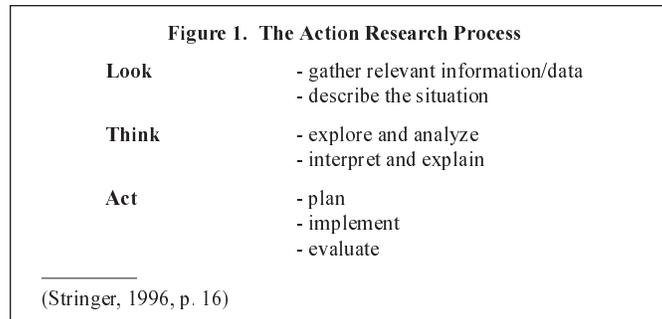
In a dissertation from Texas A&M University, an analysis of cohorts and generic groups in a university setting found that cohorts had better retention rates at the given university in the test. Further, it demonstrated through a faculty survey that faculty members are interested in understanding the culture of their students and their majors. Moreover, instructors indicated a high level of involvement in the interest and major-specific orientation classes they taught (Beran, 1996).

METHODOLOGY

Introduction of the Action Research Method

As social scientists, collegiate aviation educators should embrace scientific inquiry to resolve questions using applications of logical validity and empirical validation. This structured procedure is commonly defined as the research process. (Nachmias, 1996). Numerous tools have emerged that may be applied through accepted principles of scientific inquiry. Most readily acceptable have

been tools that provide quantitative data. However, qualitative research tools are rising to a new level of acceptance to address the complex issues facing us today. These complex, difficult issues lend example to the use of emerging alternative tools. An operational definition of action research could be defined as a research process which involves the researcher in the process of acquiring knowledge during an ongoing process in which he/she is involved. Action research emphasizes the solution of problems rather than the acquisition of scientific knowledge. There are no methodological differences between action research and other research methods. (Borg, 1963). The action research process is best summarized in Figure 1.



Action Research

Framing Action Research for Student Recruitment. The research method termed Action Research has been in active use for decades and emerged primarily grounded in the field of education. First criticized as not adhering to the rigid procedures of the scientific method (Borg, 1963), a review of research literature indicates that action research has now come to the forefront of acceptance. An explanation of this is most likely attributed to the widespread use of qualitative research paradigm tools to solve new, complex, and difficult to quantify problems. Quantitative research remains a very important research paradigm for hypothesis testing and explanatory knowledge but is limited in its ability to respond to the many rapidly changing variables in this study. Qualitative research however is more interpretive in nature but has limitations in the ability to measure specific relationships between variables. The ability of the action research model to provide an iterative process of action and feedback is well suited to the changes which occur in student recruitment. Action research is often utilized in applied research settings, and most often to explore an educational research issue. Often, administrators focus on problems or issues using research methods/tools in an action research framework. Action research is often carried out in a collaborative, or team setting, but is well suited for individual use, as in the teacher-researcher or administrator-researcher model. (McMillan, 1996).

“Action research is focused on immediate application, not on the development of theory or on general application. It has placed its emphasis on a problem here and now in a local setting. Its findings are to be evaluated in terms of local applicability, not universal validity.” (Best, 1993, p.24) This purpose can be applied to improving practice while combining research procedures, critical thinking, teamwork, and reason for study. (Best, 1993) Approaching the crucial issue of student recruitment through an action research model provides a synergistic structure to study, evaluate and initiate change to an ongoing complex problem.

Using action research as a conceptual model framework does not prohibit use of other research tools or procedures, such as triangulation to zero-in on the information needed. When actively engaged in an administrative process such as student recruitment, the evaluation of effectiveness of the process, return on budgetary investment, and maximization of human resource investment in the process are key points of ongoing action-oriented research. Perhaps these procedures are often considered a routine administrative task. Framing the process as an ongoing research endeavor will provide structure for continuous improvement. Although action research does not portend to have a generalization basis to other settings, it can provide an example of best practice which can be viewed as a case-like example.

Action Research Applied to Aviation Student Recruitment. The application of action research to the student recruitment process provides the methodological basis for approaching this vital and necessary endeavor. A 1993 report by Cornell University acknowledges that a “means to review on an ongoing basis the effectiveness of our recruitment efforts” is necessary. (Briggs et al., 1993, p. 18). The action research model is applied to the single case scenario of one aviation academic program that organized an ad hoc committee on student recruitment and retention (see Figure 3). This model was developed upon discovery of the crucial nature of the recruitment issue as identified through a focus group method. Focus groups are generally a small number of individuals brought together by a moderator as a discussion and resource group to focus on a limited topic. Focus groups can be used in qualitative studies to provide a rich source of cumulative and elaborative data in a flexible setting (Denzin & Lincoln, p. 365).

The group in this study concurred that immediate action was warranted. The focus group used the action research model to effectively implement, monitor, modify, and evaluate progress toward a goal of modest program growth. Following the model provided by Stringer in Figure 1, focus group members were assigned elements of the action research process for each stage of the student recruitment process. While working independently, team members effect assigned tasks. Through regular meetings, traditional and on-line, a consensus is generally obtained task by task toward the comprehensive outcome of maximizing effectiveness.

Action Research Model

Figure 2. Use of Stinger's Model for Recruitment		
	Stinger's Model	Recruitment Model
Look	- gather relevant information/data - describe the situation	Literature, campus/department resources Define goals for recruitment
Think	- explore and analyze - interpret and explain	Brainstorm student recruitment problem Convene committee as a focus group
Act	- plan - implement - evaluate	Use Delphi approach to formulate a plan Action oriented solutions Monitor outcomes, revise plan, track results

RESULTS**Research Tools Applied to the Action Research Model**

Results reported as information outcomes of the action research process were derived from the utilization of several research tools. These tools have been used to derive a triangulation-like approach to target the needed information outcome. Triangulation is used in qualitative research to determine if separate data sources and research tools lead to the same conclusions (Greenfield, 1996). Conceptually, this project can be viewed as a single case example, albeit not generalizable; however, it can provide an example of best practice that can be implemented by other programs. Survey research was used to gather data from prospects inquiring about the aviation program. Expert opinion and observational research tools were used to make key decision based on a five-year involvement in the process. A focus group and unstructured Delphi approach were utilized to formulate a consensus on which elements of the program are most effective to target until further evidence emerges to mandate program change. The Delphi technique is an iterative process of obtaining expert convergent opinions through the use of successive questionnaires and feedback. The experts do not meet face-to-face **THUS** allowing each person to objectively defend their own positions. Each iteration seeks a refinement of the group opinions until a general consensus is reached. The Delphi technique "is a rapid and efficient way to gain objective information from a group of experts (Babbie, p. 364)."

Outcomes of Student Recruitment Evaluation Tools

To develop a plan for internal student recruitment, a wealth of information exists in the literature regarding student recruitment. Less prevalent, are suggestions for internal student recruitment. Extracting that which is available, and using a Delphi approach, the recruitment focus group derived a plan to enhance on-campus student recruitment. Table 2 outlines these results providing strategies selected for implementation and a perceived scale of effectiveness as derived from the focus group's Delphi process.

Tracking sources of inquiry is fundamental to maximizing effectiveness. Each inquiry about the program is surveyed on key questions in order to categorize and follow-up. One key question asks for the marketing source of each inquiry. The results of these replies are outlined in Table 3. It should be noted that the effectiveness of on-campus recruitment may be direct enrollment in introductory courses. Thus, an official inquiry may not be logged.

Without exception, focus on the recruitment of students cannot be effected at the expense of services to current students. In our single case scenario, the process of retaining current students will most likely result in enhanced recruitment. This assertion is documented by the fact that personal referral is the most often cited inquiry result. Further exploration in retention is planned for another article in a series.

The authors have proposed a plan involving (a) the development of goals, (b) the design of marketing strategies, (c) the creation of a budget, (d) evaluation, and (e) feedback to repeat the process. The multi-step process of developing the plan of action, making contact with the students, and assessing the results of the process must be implemented for an effective continuous quality improvement system to result.

Table 2
Case Example's Internal Recruitment Plan

<i>Strategies Utilized</i>	<i>Scale of Effectiveness (5 being highest)</i>
Flyers on Campus	5
Word of Mouth	5
Campus Newspaper	4
Aviation Booths at Key Events	4
Sponsored Events	
Golf Tournament	4
Aviation Student Appreciation Day	4
Aviation Guest Speakers Promoted at the University	3
Letters to Advisors Asking to Promote Aviation Electives	3
Campus Radio/Electronic Billboards	3
Letter to All Undeclared Major Students	3
Letter to All ROTC Students Every Semester	3
Participation in New Student Orientation	2
Information Kiosks Located at Strategic Locations	1

Table 3
Sources of Internal Inquiries

<i>Strategies Used for Internal Marketing</i>	<i>Number of Inquiries 96-97</i>	<i>Percentage of Inquiries 96-97</i>
Personal Referrals/Word of Mouth	51	30.6%
Career Fairs	41	24.3%
Web Sites	23	13.5%
College Course Catalog	22	13.1%
Campus Newspapers	21	12.5%
ROTC	8	4.8%
Walk-Ins	2	1.2%
Total	168	100.0

DISCUSSION

There is no doubt that a significant need exists for more students in our aviation colleges and universities. The aviation industry needs these aviation graduates and is now looking, more than ever before, to the aviation educational institutions of this country to satisfy that need. The authors of this paper have propounded that internal recruitment is a fertile area from which to attract new aviation students to the aviation colleges and universities. The authors have pointed out that virtually no literature exists on how to successfully recruit students for any specific program or major from within the campus population.

The authors have also demonstrated that internal recruitment will produce the most productive and most cost effective results in aviation student recruitment. The authors have explored the various methods available to colleges offering aviation majors or degrees for the internal recruitment of these additional students and they have determined which methods should work best for the small, medium and large aviation programs in United States educational institutions. Finally, the authors have shown that a problem exists with retaining all of those aviation students which the colleges and universities have worked so hard to initially recruit.

The authors have pointed out that on all college campuses there exist many undecided students who would welcome information about the exciting career field of aviation, and that using the concept of marketing to attract those students is not the onerous and unworthy concept as initially perceived by most post-secondary educators. The flashy ad or slick brochure approach commonly associated with commercial marketing is not the only way to snare that new aviation student. It is entirely professional and, in this modern academic world, necessary to the future of our aviation programs that colleges and universities go out and sell their aviation programs. The astute college administrator will realize that the minimal marketing strategy used in the past, where aviation programs merely designed their curriculum and waited for students to magically appear, is no longer effective.

It is now up to the faculty and administration of the aviation colleges to become educated in the concepts of marketing for student recruitment discussed in this paper; to utilize action research (which appears to be the most proper method to operationalize this key educational research issue); to select which methods work best for them in their individual situations; and to implement those methods to attract and retain aviation students for now and in the future. The collegiate aviation department or program must acquire a student recruitment marketing orientation if it is going to excel within the institution or its discipline. The department chair or program director holds the key role. The chair will have to create the marketing initiative of the department in the same manner other departmental initiatives are established. The chair must also realize that traditional methods may centralize the marketing efforts of an institution away from the department. It, therefore, becomes obvious that any successful aca-

demographic department in general, and an aviation department in particular, must attempt to participate in the marketing efforts of the entire institution.

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